DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 089 382 CS 500 641

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| AUTHOR | Hufford, Roger |
| TITLE | The Debate Tournament. |
| PUB DATE | Mar 74 |
| NOTE | 8p.; Paper given at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (Washington, D. C., March 1974) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE |
| DESCRIPTORS | Cocurricular Activities; *Debate; *Educational Change; *Evaluation Techniques; *Higher Education; Persuasive Discourse; Problem Solving; *Program Evaluation; Public Speaking |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Debate Judges |

ABSTRACT

Current practices in intercollegiate debate encourage inadequate reasoning and the use of short cuts in debate presentations. Poor debate strategies have emerged. For example, the inclusion, by negative teams, of excessively detailed arguments in constructive speeches has caused affirmative rebuttals to be acutely simplistic or has forced affirmative teams to adopt devious or exotic plans in the hope that the negative will not have detailed, stock answers to use in refutation. Further, debate judges tend not to use the time allowed them to question some of the debaters' points or critique the debates. Improvements in debate programs could include the assignment of topics on several subjects for a debate year, the adoption of special wordings of topics for special tournaments, changes in the time format for debating, and some changes in the fee structures of tournaments to eliminate the awarding of excessive numbers of trophies. (CH)

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# The Debate Tournament

Roger Hufford

If a modern Rip Van Winkle had fallen asleep in 1954, he would be bewildered by the changes in our 1974 society. Unisex, the drug culture, and Richard Nixon wooing the Communist Chinese would undoubtedly stun him. But one place he would feel comfortably at home would be the National Debate Tournament. After noting the move from one military academy to another, he could relax and enjoy the spectacle of the glorious past being relived one more time.

It would be nice to think that one field of human endeavor had been perfected, and while others continue to seek truth, we fortunate few have found it. This optimistic rationale for the unchanging nature of our activity seems to be denied by the massive apathy most students exhibit toward debate, to say nothing of the active hostility of many of our colleagues and, perhaps more importantly, the indifference of those on whom we must rely for funds. The educational dollar is shrinking fast, and the worth of our activity in the eyes of others will have to increase, or debate will shrink with it. Appropriately, a proposed conference on forensics invites us to consider what changes might profitably be explored.

I'd like to condemn three developments in debate that seem bad to me, then propose some remedies. The three villains are related; let's call them A. The SPREAD, B. The SQUIRREL, and C. SILENCE.

The SPREAD is the negative strategy of employing the 15 minute block to try to introduce more arguments numerically than the affirmative team

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can answer in their five minute rebuttal. Quantity, rather than quality, is unfortunately the key. The SPREAD is ordinarily not an inspirational time for keen analysis of weakness the negative has found in the planks of the affirmative plan. Instead it is a reading of prepared arguments from plastic sheets at a rate unintelligible to human beings outside the tournament environment, and often to those inside. The quantity-rather-than-quality game has led to such wonderful contributions to our language as "draw that across your flow and star it," which always tempts me to respond with equally explicit, but somewhat more vulgar instructions to the speaker.

The SPREAD depends on time strictures for its success. Four major problems result:

1. The affirmative team is compelled to rely on superficial analysis and "sloughing" plan attacks.

2. Subsequent rebuttals lose all coherence as speakers try to cover every issue.

3. Affirmative teams are driven to adopt evasive strategies, primarily the SQUIRREL, to avoid the SPREAD.

4. Judging is made more difficult and arbitrary, due to the evasive strategies and to the problems inherent in judging SQUIRREL approaches.

The trouble with the spread is that it works. Coaches of successful teams have described it like Listerine - "I don't like it, but I use it." Because negatives use the SPREAD, and because current topic selection procedures yield unmanageably broad topics, we have a second major problem: the SQUIRREL.

Affirmative teams fear the SPREAD, and many resort to squirrel cases to evade prepared negative arguments. Not everyone will agree on what is

a SQUIRREL. Some teams use an unusual approach because they are convinced it is the best answer. Other teams use it simply to avoid negative attack. The test would be whether the case was used all season, or scrapped once word got around. I believe many teams adopt the SQUIRREL for a tournament or two, then move on to another one, and this is an abuse. If debate is to train students to find viable solutions to problems, it should not place a premium on trick cases that catch the opposition unprepared. In the real world, we seldom solve serious problems by taking them by surprise. The current popularity of SQUIRREL approaches hurts our activity four ways:

1. BAD DEBATES. Where both teams are not prepared on the same issue, a bad debate results.

2. BAD JUDGING. Judges have to vote often on topicality, and one team goes away unhappy with the result.

3. FEWER DEBATERS. Time demands for research are so extensive that interested persons are driven out of debate, simply because they can't keep up with the multiple interpretations judges accept as legitimate.

4. LOSS OF PRESTIGE. Busy students are pushed out of debate, and the single-minded drudges are left to succeed with word-twisting practices that anyone outside of the tournament circuit would label as "sophistry."

This brings me to my last related villain - C. SILENCE. Twenty minutes or more, in every debate. When we legitimized the SQUIRREL, we made it unreasonable to expect the negative to get up and speak. They need time to ponder more evidence than a Watergate committee, and find an attack on a case they are not really well prepared to argue. Whatever chance debate might have had to attract an audience is certainly gone with long pauses

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between speeches. The debate lasts so long there is another silence at the end of the debate - the CRITIQUE is a victim of the SQUIRREL and the SPREAD.

In every round one person can respond with unbiased, trained judgment - the judge. Judges' decisions are not always consistent, but the reasons and professionals should be of value to students if they had a chance to hear them, and the quality of those suggestions should be the justification for using coaches as judges. I have a bias - I like to give critiques. Some debaters have thanked me, and said my suggestions were helpful. Positive relationships have been formed, and learning has taken place in a context of high motivation resulting from competition. But, first in "prestige" tournaments, and now increasingly everywhere, that 20 minutes is spent waiting for debaters to find answers. I don't think we make good use of time that way, and I urge that we take action to minimize the SPREAD, eliminate the SQUIRREL, and put all that SILENCE to a productive use.

What can be done? The underlying rationale for the following suggestions is that alternative approaches to debate should be supported and encouraged by the American Forensic Association and its members. For example,

1. MULTIPLE TOPICS. Last year, by a vote of 193 to 102, coaches expressed a wish to see multiple topics on the ballot. A single proposition for the year finished third of five choices. Why can't we have a single ambiguous topic for those who want that sort of thing, and two specific topics for those who are tired of the broad topic and squirrel business? AFA could endorse both options by declaring THE national TOPICS.

2. AFFIRMATIVE OPTIONS.

A. WORDING. I propose that tournament directors (or even the topic selection committee) suggest a large number of alternate wordings of the topic acceptable in a particular tournament. Affirmative teams may

suggest additonal wordings for a particular tournament, if they submit them far enough in advance to permit distribution to all competing teams. The affirmative team is given choice of topic in each round, but then is expected to debate that topic, not evade it. For example, this year wordings like "Resolved: that the Federal Government should prohibit further development of nuclear energy for domestic purposes," "Resolved: that the Federal Government should act to promote a hydrogen economy," or even "Resolved: that a Federal Program of gun control should be established," might all be authorized for a tournament with godd debates resulting. Each tournament could choose what to authorize (and what not to authorize), and negatives would have notice of new kinds of cases. Affirmatives would know in advance what is not acceptable, and bring topical cases. The negative gives up their chance to win a round on topicality, and gains in return a reasonable indication of what things are to be debated.

B. FORMAT. I propose the affirmative be allowed to combat the negative SPREAD by having a choice of formats for each round. Brock and others have suggested a number of alternative formats. My favorite is moving the 15 minute negative block forward to follow the first affirmative speech, with all major issues to be introduced in the first 25 minutes. This kind of choice would give the affirmative a weapon against the spread, and in return we could expect them to forego the SQUIRREL. Furthermore, variety would be introduced into our season without requiring more research from already overworked debaters.

3. Eliminate waiting time betweem speeches - by a 1 minute limit. With the SQUIRREL slain, this could easily be done, and we could bring back the CRITIQUE.

4. In underview, I want to propose some alterations in tournament fee structures. This year, tournament fees cost us more than food, more than lodging, more than transportation. And we skipped a lot of tournaments because their fees were too high. Much of that money went to buy trophies. After watching a news release on starvation in Africa the other night, my horror at our sense of values increased. Something is wrong when mediocre novices can gather in a single season more and bigger awards than Sergeant York.

A trophy is a symbol. The achievement is what we ought to be proud of, not the symbol. Increasingly, tournaments are being viewed as, and even advertized as hardware sales. One tournament we attended this year had 28 entries and 16 trophies. A trophy under those circumstances is a symbol of mediocrity, or something less than mediocrity for 2 of the 16 winners. The director finally came to his senses and abolished the octafinal round, and sixteen trophies were not, in fact, awarded. We were just charged for them in tournament fees.

I would propose that the American Forensic Association print attractive certificates and sell them as low-cost tournament awards. Records of winners could be kept, and super-certificates awarded to debaters winning 5, 10, or 20 of them. They could be called master-debaters - or perhaps some more appropriate title could be found. Such awards would be inexpensive and portable, provide exactly the same symbolic significance and recognition as trophies, and clutter the office less.

Another possibility - one we may implement for our tournament next year - would be variable pricing, like this:

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| Cost per team to compete | $ 1 |
| Cost per team desiring trophies if they win | $10 |
| Cost per team desiring trophies whether they win or not | $20 |

Trophies purchased from the $10 fees would go to the teams paying $10 that finished highest. Those paying $20 would get trophies on a direct purchase bases, and could in fact pay more if they wished something more elaborate. News stories for local papers would not, of course, be censored.

A similar flexibility on meals would also be commendable, and consistent with principles of free choice. This brings me to a final item on finances. One reason we sell trophies and meals is to disguise charges to finance our own season. This practice has been squarely condemned by the AFA Tournament Code. Yet the code appears to me to be consistently violated, jduging from our own tournament, in which we charge $5, give trophies, and make a profit. The AFA has done nothing about this abuse, even after polling membership and determining that a large majority support the standard.

Listing and making optional the trophy and meal costs would make cost accountability easier, and AFA should require everyone who lists a tournament on their calendar to submit an accounting of charges, develop guidelines for what is reasonable, and refuse to list tournaments that appear to exceed guidelines flagrantly. Perhaps it is not possible or desirable for AFA to prevent overpriced tournaments from taking place, but they can refuse to provide their sanction.

In summary, I believe the changes I have suggested would make debate attractive to more students, would make it possible for our budgets to provide activity for the increased numbers, and would make it more useful training for those who participated. It would also be more fun to listen to, and more fun to judge. Finally, such innovations as these would be in wide use next year if just one thing happened - if the NDT announced that they would be utilizing some of the suggestions at the National Tournament

in a way that would affect the outcome. Since AFA pays for that tournament, they have a right to demand that it function to raise the appeal of the activity for all debaters and potential debaters. If we insist, future Rip Wan Winkle's could awake to find in debate some proof that benefits can be derived by applying logic and ingenuity to the takk of improving our social and educational institutions.